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Women at work: Why mentoring is good but sponsoring is even better

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WOMEN AT WORK: WHY MENTORING IS GOOD BUT SPONSORING IS EVEN BETTER

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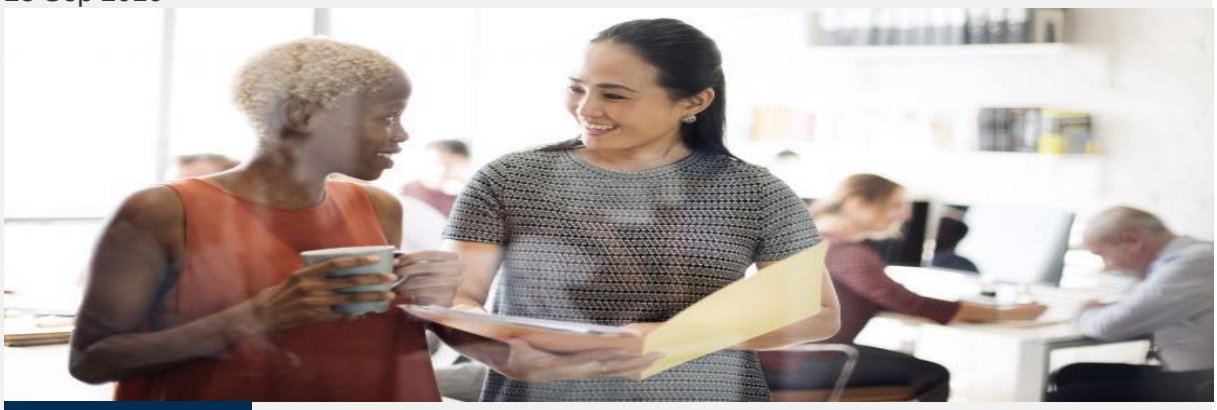

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It can take proactive support and influence to open doors to opportunities

In the drive to get more women into senior management roles in business, mentoring programs have proliferated both within organisations and across sectors. But the question remains – why haven't these mentoring relationships had a significant impact on the statistics?

According to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, women in Australia hold 33 percent of senior management roles and progress towards improving these figures is slow compared with other developed countries. Across Australia, only 15.4 percent of CEO positions are held by women.

Although many large organisations will have mentoring programs in place as standard good practice, and as a sign of their commitment to diversifying the workforce, fine intentions don't appear to be affecting the status quo.

That isn't to disparage the goodwill of mentors, who volunteer their time to offer the benefit of their experience. The advantages of talking to an individual, with complete confidentiality, who can be a sounding board for ideas, problems and challenges is of great benefit, says **Julie Cogin**, a professor and director of the Australian Graduate School of Management at UNSW Business School.

"Mentors can help you understand the unwritten rules, provide a map for the uncharted corridors to power, and reveal 'the business behind the business'," Cogin says.

But many recipients agree that mentoring has limitations. And if women are ever going to break through that glass ceiling, something more pro-active is required. Instead, sponsors are

increasingly being seen as the answer for women seeking to move their career forward and upward.

PATH TO POWER AND INFLUENCE

A sponsor is someone who has power within an organisation and who can not only advise but can facilitate meetings and introductions, use their connections and credibility to advance a woman's career.

At the Centre for Talent Innovation, a Manhattan-based think tank, president and CEO **Sylvia Ann Hewlett** says their research indicates that sponsors, not mentors, facilitate real career traction.

"Sponsors put you on the path to power and influence by affecting three things: pay raises, high-profile assignments and promotions," says Hewlett.

"When it comes to asking for a pay raise, the majority of men (67 percent) and women (70 percent) resist confronting their boss. With a sponsor in their corner, however, nearly half of men and 38 percent of women will make the request – and, our focus-group research suggests, will succeed in getting the raise."

Results were equally positive when it came to getting assigned to a high-visibility team or plum project. Some 43 percent of male employees and 36 percent of females will approach their manager and make the request, but with a sponsor backing them, the numbers rise to 56 percent and 44 percent, respectively.

DOORS TO OPPORTUNITIES

Susan Price, a director (people and organisation) at PwC in Sydney, has benefited from both mentoring and sponsorship. She describes the focus of mentoring as "how to help the mentee 'get fixed' or get through a difficult situation or reflect on ways to do things differently".

Sponsorship, she says, is much more about "using networks to open doors to opportunities that you can't open yourself".

"Mentoring talks in the room to you about you. Sponsorship talks about you when you're not there," says Price. "That's why it is particularly effective for women, for whom doors are more difficult to open."

Price met her sponsor, Graham Cowley, in 1999 when she was working as a lawyer in his small firm. She says they never had a formal conversation around sponsoring, but Cowley was incredibly well connected and very good with people.

"He was always handing me business cards and saying, 'You give them a call; I was talking about you to them'. I got the sense consistently that he was promoting me in a positive way. It wasn't just me, he was always empowering people to enable them to do their thing, not with him or for his benefit, but for theirs," says Price.

It was Cowley who put her name forward to be a partner and later, her first board position. Even after he had retired from the firm, Price would still get calls from people who had been recommended by Cowley to talk to her.

"Sponsorship relies on the sponsor seeing something in you – but also on their generosity to extend into their network." Price thinks it requires a particular kind of individual who is confident enough not to feel their influence is being diminished by helping others to get ahead.

When you receive that kind of support, says Price, it also motivates you to live up to the praise and expectations.

ANALYSIS OF NEEDS

One could argue that Price was lucky as well as smart. She happened to be in the right place at the right time to meet the right someone who saw her potential. But Australia can't afford to leave workplace diversity to luck.

Cogin believes that widening the definition of what mentoring can be would be a good step to making it more effective.

"It can be a real developmental role, enhancing skills, a sounding board, or it can be more of a sponsorship role, drawing on someone's network, bringing someone you work with on to a committee. Not just coaching their performance and giving feedback," says Cogin.

One reason that mentoring can fail, she thinks, is that not enough preparation happens beforehand.

"The mentee arrives without having clarity around what they want to get from the time together. So they go along and talk about something on the fly rather than work with a mentor on a specific career objective."

The success of a mentoring program depends on an analysis of needs at the beginning of the relationship, says Cogin.

"The question has to be asked: what specifically do they need or are seeking from a mentoring arrangement? If they are looking for international experience, for example, then how can they be matched up with a mentor who can tangibly help them in that specific way?

"That's often the missing ingredient a lot of times – thinking through what is required and who and how another person can help."

In some cases, Cogin says, the most valuable experience begins when the formal mentoring program ends and the informal relationship continues, often away from a workplace environment.

SOMEONE JUST LIKE YOU

But the fact is, these kinds of easy relationships occur more frequently between men.

"I could identify more of my male peers who have had influential sponsors than my female peers," says Price.

"And there are lots of social constructs that make those relationships easier to form. The old school tie network and sporting clubs where men congregate – and, not surprisingly, those relationships are overwhelmingly white."

The problem with this is obvious, says Price. In these environments it's much more likely that you will sponsor someone just like you – a miniature version to take under your wing.

It raises the question of whether it is possible to create conscious sponsorship programs at all, or whether it is only something that can occur organically.

Take the example of high-achieving Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, whose rise to the top was due in large part to Larry Summers. They met at Harvard and he took her with him to the World Bank as his research assistant, later appointing her his chief of staff at the US Treasury.

Loretta Lynch is another case in point. A talented and experienced attorney, it is unlikely however that she would have become the first African-American female US attorney-general without the proactive support of President Obama.

But sponsorship isn't about favouritism, cautions Price. It's about identifying and accessing opportunity. Or to put it more succinctly, she adds: "It's getting people to the start line when previously they wouldn't even have been in the race."